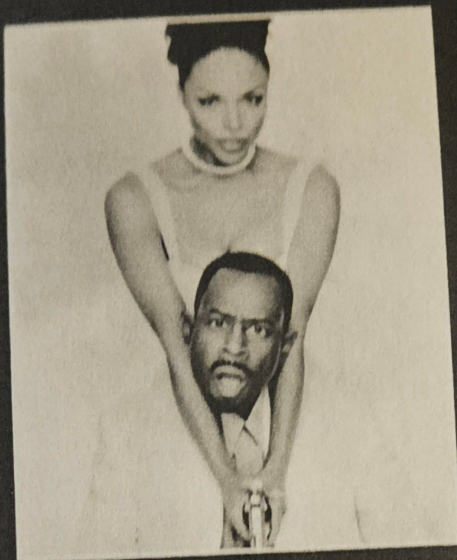


BLACK DIRECTORS

IN HOLLYWOOD

MELVIN DONALSON

MAYA ANGELOU
 PARIS BARCLAY
 TROY BEYER
 JAMES BOND III
 CHARLES BURNETT
 TOPPER CAREW
 THOMAS CARTER
 CHRISTOPHER
 SCOTT CHEROT
 RUSTY CUNDIEFF
 JULIE DASH
 OSSIE DAVIS
 ERNEST DICKERSON
 IVAN DIXON
 BILL DUKE
 CHERYL DUNYE
 JAMAA FANAKA
 CARL FRANKLIN
 ANTOINE FUQUA
 F. GARY GRAY
 BERRY GORDY JR.
 LESLIE HARRIS
 WENDELL B. HARRIS JR.
 KEVIN HOOKS
 REGINALD HUDLIN
 ART AND ALLEN HUGHES
 GEORGE JACKSON
 DAVID CLARK JOHNSON
 STAN LATHAN
 MARTIN LAWRENCE
 SPIKE LEE
 KASI LEMMONS
 DARNELL MARTIN



LIONEL C. MARTIN
 DOUG MCHENRY
 GILBERT MOSES
 EDDIE MURPHY
 RON O'NEAL
 EUZHAN PALCY
 GORDON PARKS
 GORDON PARKS JR.
 ROBERT PATTON-SPRUILL
 SIDNEY POITIER
 PRINCE
 RICHARD PRYOR
 TIM REID
 MATTY RICH
 HUGH A. ROBERTSON
 MICHAEL SCHULTZ
 DARIN SCOTT
 OZ SCOTT
 MILLICENT SHELTON
 JOHN SINGLETON
 RAYMOND ST. JACQUES
 KEVIN RODNEY SULLIVAN
 GEORGE TILLMAN JR.
 ROBERT TOWNSEND
 MARIO VAN PEEBLES
 MELVIN VAN PEEBLES
 KEENEN IVORY WAYNE
 FOREST WHITAKER
 HYPE WILLIAMS
 FRED WILLIAMSON
 PRESTON A. WHITMAN
 THEODORE WITCHE

Donalson

Copyright © 2003 by the University of Texas Press

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

First edition, 2003

Requests for permission to reproduce material from this work should be sent to Permissions, University of Texas Press, Box 7819, Austin, TX 78713-7819.

© The paper used in this book meets the minimum requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992 (R1997) (Permanence of Paper).

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Donalson, Melvin Burke, 1952–

Black directors in Hollywood / Melvin Donalson.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-292-70178-0 (cloth : alk. paper) —

ISBN 0-292-70179-9 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. African Americans in motion pictures. 2. African American motion picture producers and directors — United States—Biography. I. Title.

PN1995.9.N4D66 2003

791.43'0233'092273—dc21

2003006770

appears reflective and self-critical. Over his lifetime, he has been awarded twenty-four honorary degrees; the NAACP's Spingarn Medal in 1972; the National Medal of Arts at the White House in 1988; and accolades from dozens of his peers and filmmakers who followed him through the studio doors. He writes of himself: "I've been given several names—Mr. Dreamer, Mr. Striver, and occasionally Mr. Success. I've tried on all three for size. The first fit rather well; the third still has a slight feel of discomfort."¹¹ Whether prepared for it or not, Gordon Parks should accept the praise for the historical and cultural significance of his film directing, which has served as an exceptional model for black directors who have followed.

Melvin Van Peebles

One of the reasons I originally wanted to make films was that I got tired of what they [Hollywood filmmakers] were doing. . . . I knew I could do better. At least, I knew it wouldn't be hard to do better than that. . . . It took me ten years to get a chance to do it their way, and what I discovered at Columbia Pictures is that their way gets in my way. . . . I just did my best and got on with my own independent career.¹² Melvin Van Peebles

It may be difficult to measure the extent to which Melvin Van Peebles shaped black filmmaking, and perhaps even more difficult to assess to what

degree Van Peebles has inspired African American artists in general. Van Peebles has attained legendary status among creative people who view his success as a testament of perseverance and self-belief. At the very least, Van Peebles represents a pioneering independent vision that forced Hollywood studios to be aware of a new approach to the cinematic renditions of African Americans.

Born in 1932 in Chicago, Van Peebles went to Ohio Wesleyan University, receiving his B.A. degree in 1953. In 1955, he met Maria, a woman from a rich, white liberal family, and together they had three children, including a son, Mario. Van Peebles went into the air force and became an aviator, and after three years in the service he settled in San Francisco, where he began to make short films—one entitled *Three Pickup Men for Herrick* completed in 1958.¹³ Finding that his talents were not welcomed in Hollywood, Van Peebles eventually made his way to Holland to study astronomy at the University of Amsterdam, where he studied acting as well. Facing marital problems, he journeyed to Paris, where he once again was drawn to filmmaking. Knowing he could get financial support from the government as a French filmmaker, Van Peebles taught himself French and wrote several novels to make a name for himself. His strategy worked, as he went on to make the French film *The Story of a Three-Day Pass* (1968), a film that received critical attention at the San Francisco Film Festival. From there, Van Peebles was able to make his way back to Hollywood.

Between 1968 and 1989, Van Peebles directed four feature films besides *Three-Day Pass: Watermelon Man* (1970), *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), *Don't Play Us Cheap* (1973), and *Identity Crisis* (1989). The films offer a startling variety in tone, showcasing the contrasts between Van Peebles' work inside and outside the studio system.

The Story of a Three-Day Pass is a film that explores an interracial love affair between a black American serviceman and a white Parisian woman, emphasizing the racial consciousness of the black soldier and the racism of fellow white American soldiers. When the film was screened at the San Francisco Film Festival, it received some enthusiastic responses. One journalist acknowledged that "[s]ome of Van Peebles direction [was] good, especially where he gets across the idea that what people do and what they think may not run along the same lines."¹⁴ However, other negative criticisms surfaced, and these mixed reactions to Van Peebles' first film were indicative of the oppositional responses he would continue to receive throughout his career, as critics, both black and white, have resisted Van Peebles' expressionistic, excessive visual style.

When Van Peebles completed *Don't Play Us Cheap* (1973), an adaptation

from his own play, the response was lukewarm, as exemplified by one critic who concluded that "the film remains stagebound but engaging in sharing the ambiance of a Saturday night in Harlem."¹³ This film remains one of Van Peebles' least-known works and was generally ridiculed by those reviewers who made the effort to evaluate it.

However, his three films *Watermelon Man*, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, and *Identity Crisis* are his most accomplished. The first movie, *Watermelon Man*, by its very title, prompts a reaction that taps into America's racial history and African American stereotypes. Scripted as a comedy by white writer Herman Raucher, the intention of the film was to provide a satiric look at the alleged liberal suburban notions of equality.

Van Peebles' sensibilities as an independent filmmaker are obvious in this film. Although *Watermelon Man* has a polished look in places, Van Peebles—serving as both director and music composer—consistently strikes a satiric chord with a heavy-handed experimenting in visuals and sound. The story centers on a white middle-class insurance salesman named Jeff Gerber (Godfrey Cambridge in whiteface makeup at first). Gerber, an outspoken racial bigot and sexist, awakes one morning to discover that he has turned black. In his shock and initial denial, Gerber believes that an overexposure to his sun lamp has caused the darkening of his skin; consequently, he uses extensive showers, bleaching creams, and even milk baths in futile attempts to regain the white complexion he worships. Inevitably, he endures a set of experiences with various white people in his life who display their hypocrisy, racial prejudice, and belief in racial stereotypes. After losing his family, job, house, and lifestyle, Gerber finally accepts his new blackness and all life's lessons that have come with it.

Unfortunately, the film contains awkward visual and aural expressions that weigh down an already vaporous script that relied too much on cutesy one-liners. The most memorable aspect of the film becomes the performance by Godfrey Cambridge. Required to pull off physical and verbal humor, as well as the pathos of an emotionally lost man, Cambridge is consistently radiant in a rather enigmatic role.

When looking for directorial areas to note, several are scattered throughout the film, even though the coherence of the entire film falters. One such area is centered in the visual metaphor of the "running black man." Van Peebles sets up this icon early in the film as Gerber goes through a daily ritual of jogging along the sidewalks in his suit and tie to beat the city bus to a distant bus stop. As he easily scurries past the bus, the bus's white patrons urge the black driver to hurry along to beat Gerber in his arrogant display



Jeff Gerber (Godfrey Cambridge, right, in whiteface) says good-bye to his wife (Estelle Parsons) in *Watermelon Man*.

of physical fitness. But when Gerber turns black and goes running through white neighborhoods, the reactions by whites alter—white women scream in fear, white men watch suspiciously, and eventually white police officers detain Gerber, believing he's running away from a crime scene.

The image of the "running black man" carries both a historical meaning (escaping slavery to freedom) and a political meaning (blacks running from racial hegemony). It works effectively in revealing the burdens imposed upon black men by a system that will always qualify and punish their blackness. This visual of the "running black man" surfaces again in a more jolting manner in Van Peebles' next film, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*.

When *Sweet Sweetback* was first released, it ignited outbreaks of discussions and arguments both within and outside the African American community. With an X rating for its elements of graphic sex, and with its nihilistic content, the film was either panned as cinematic trash by some or heralded

as cinematic radicalism by others. And since its release, the film's value has continued into the 1990s, and the film has assumed a cult status by young black filmmakers and the hip-hop generation.

Sweet Sweetback follows the exploits of a black man who demonstrates such exceptional skills during his preteen sexual initiation that his older lover anoints him with the name "Sweetback." His sexual prowess continues into adulthood, as he becomes a featured performer at an underground sex theater. But when he intercedes and beats two white policemen who were pummeling a black revolutionary suspect, Sweetback becomes a fugitive. He embodies the "running black man" who escapes the ghetto streets, to reach the rural countryside, and finally to reach and cross the Mexican border.

Given the historical context of Black Power during the late '60s and the growing Black Arts movement, the objectives of *Sweet Sweetback*—with its revolutionary messages and black hero figure—were appropriate and timely. However, the final film carries such provocative content and displays such an unusual visual style that it was doomed to controversy—a controversy that made it a financial success.

Black historian Lerone Bennett Jr. labels the film as "tasteless," suggesting its value was that it was "an obligatory step for anyone who want[ed] to go further and make the first revolutionary black film."¹⁶ Augmenting that negative assessment, one black critic complains that the film "shows the moral decadence of some black folks, but never at any time does he [Van Peebles] reveal the social and political forces responsible for that decadence. . . . Van Peebles pictures sexual freakishness as an essential and unmistakable part of black reality and history—a total distortion and gross affront to black people."¹⁷ From another viewpoint at that time, Huey Newton, a leader of the Black Panthers, would refer to the film as revolutionary black art,¹⁸ echoing the praise that many viewers attributed to the film.

From a contemporary perspective, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* certainly stands out as an independent venture that became an impressive commercial accomplishment. Van Peebles raised \$500,000 from his directorial earnings from *Watermelon Man* and various investors, and the film grossed over \$10 million in its first run.¹⁹ Even by today's accounting, that kind of twenty-to-one return can only be viewed as remarkable.

The final credit at the movie's end informs the viewer that the film was written, composed, produced, directed, and edited by Melvin Van Peebles. With hindsight, that accomplishment as a black auteur must be admired, but with that same hindsight, the goals that Van Peebles set out to achieve are not that perceptible. Without a doubt, the black man breaking his shackles and running for freedom connects Sweetback to his racial ancestors, as

does the use of gospel music, blues, jazz, and the call-and-response chorus over the final sequences of the film. Van Peebles does a noteworthy job of linking the protagonist to a list of nameless black men who preceded him. In addition, Van Peebles emphasizes the ongoing friction between black men and police officers that surfaced again in the '90s with regard to Rodney King and O. J. Simpson.

The political messages of black unity, pride, and determinism falter, however, when weakened by the gratuitous and explicit sex in the film. Although the filmmaker wants to suggest the notion that sex has been the one province given to black men to display their competence, this notion itself is rooted within a racial stereotype nurtured during the slavery era. Van Peebles appears to be validating that sexual stereotype, even as he insists that other racial stereotypes are faulty. In particular, this sexual generalization carries another message in the film—black women are promiscuous. The filmmaker constructs black female characters that are either passive mother figures or lustful sexual figures, undercutting its proclaimed revolutionary dimensions. The latter images remain the most prevalent, assigning a rather narrow significance to black women and their place in the community and within any political activism. In four separate scenes, black women characters eagerly engage in sexual intercourse with Sweetback, suggesting, even if unintentionally, that black women are lascivious.

Even when the filmmaker attempts to present sex as a political weapon, the camera's lingering lens over naked flesh makes a different type of statement. In the sequence when Sweetback and the black revolutionary are fleeing the city, they are confronted by a gang of white bikers. When Sweetback is given his choice of weapons to challenge the gang leader in order to win his freedom, Sweetback chooses sex. The bikers' leader is a white woman—a blond Amazon—and as the woman and Sweetback strip and have intercourse in the circle made by the bikers, Van Peebles is obviously confronting the historical taboo of miscegenation. The scene is presented with frontal nudity and close shots of gyrating bodies until the white biker queen screams out Sweetback's name in orgasmic pleasure. Sweetback, and by association black men, has defeated the white bikers and the racial taboo, but the victory is only transitory, won through the phallus and not the spirit and intellect. Van Peebles reduces the political potency of the sequence to mere sexual potency. The black hero is just a black stud.

Nearly two decades after *Sweet Sweetback*, Van Peebles directed *Identity Crisis* (1989), based on the script by his son, Mario. The film presents the story of a deceased, gay French fashion designer who moves in and out of the body of a black rap performer. The gimmick here is that a street witch

grants the request of the dying gay designer to live on, so his spirit is transferred into the body of the black rapper. The transformation is a bit incomplete, however, and consequently, whenever receiving a physical bump to the head, either the personality of the rapper or the designer dominates. Both the elder and younger Van Peebles understood that such a premise was outlandish and fantastical, as the film displays the tongue-in-cheek warning before the opening credits: "weird crap from Melvin and Mario." The film lives up to its warning as it parades a menagerie of characters: rappers, a nerd, Sikh drug smugglers, homeless witches, a dominatrix, a mute mud-wrestling Amazon, and a narrating cop who speaks in rhymes.

Other than the use of superimposition, when the narrating cop (Melvin Van Peebles) appears in a ghostly fashion over the action, or the use of black-and-white film images in various sequences, the elder Van Peebles does not distinguish himself as a director in this movie. Instead, the film appears to be a vehicle to showcase the screen presence of the younger Van Peebles, as Mario portrays both the streetwise urban rapper and the gay French designer.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of *Identity Crisis* within the collective works of Melvin Van Peebles can be found in the title itself. As with his earlier films, Van Peebles returns to the theme of identity—how complex it can be, but how simplistic and limiting when reduced only to race. He seems to be asserting that black people have survived those limitations, and that white people destroy themselves and others around them by maintaining those limitations.

In a notable fashion, Melvin Van Peebles has survived as a filmmaker despite the controversy and the limitations thrown at him. He appears to have shaped his film career in the same manner as a number of his films—elliptically, sporadically, but always with control. The quirkiness and frenetic energy of his visual style has influenced many directors that have followed him, and certainly his maverick and often radical approach to completing films has inspired just as many directors, regardless of their racial identity.